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FROM: 

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Director of Global Issues

SUBJECT:

Syria: Scenarios of Dramatic Political  
Change 

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1. This memorandum presents a number of possible scenarios that could lead to the ouster of President Assad or other dramatic change in Syria. It thus complements Intelligence Community assessments and estimates that focus on probable further developments in Syria. The analysis, purposely provocative, aims to make explicit and bring to the forefront of our thinking the diversity of challenges that could force political change in Syria in the years to come. Because the analysis out of context is susceptible to misunderstanding, external distribution has been severely restricted. Please limit circulation in your office and do not reproduce the document. Your thoughts on the analysis and suggested indicators are welcome.

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2. We will send you similar papers on other countries as they are completed.

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Attachment:

Syria: Scenarios of Dramatic  
Political Change   
(GI M 86-20099L), 28 July 1986,

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SUBJECT: Syria: Scenarios of Dramatic Political Change  
 (GI M 86-20099L) [redacted]

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SYRIA: SCENARIOS OF DRAMATIC POLITICAL CHANGE\* 

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## PREFACE

This memorandum explores alternative scenarios that could lead to the ouster of President Hafiz al-Assad in Syria. Specifically, it seeks to clarify the individuals and groups that might impel or impede takeover attempts and presents indicators that would suggest specific scenarios are unfolding. The analysis, purposely provocative, does not attempt to predict the likelihood of specific outcomes other than in the broadest sense. Rather it provides a structured way of thinking about dramatic political change in Syria on the basis of observable events and thus a greater ability to recognize the potential implications of key developments.

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## SUMMARY

The sixteen years that Assad has been in power belies the tensions below the surface of Syrian politics. Syria is governed by an Alawi minority whose rule is deeply resented by the Sunni majority it dislodged from power two decades ago. Factionalism plagues the political and military elite, and the military's strong tradition of coup plotting--dormant since Assad took control in 1970--could reassert itself.

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\*This memorandum was prepared by  Foreign Subversion and Instability Center, Office of Global Issues. Information available as of 30 July was used in this report. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to  Chief/Political Instability Branch, OGI

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[Redacted]

We judge that the most likely scenario of dramatic change in Syria is a power struggle over succession. Despite his poor health, Assad has failed to designate a successor or otherwise provide for a transfer of power. Should he name his brother, Rif'at al-Assad, to succeed him or should his brother assume power upon Assad's death or incapacitation, we believe Rif'at's powerful military enemies would be likely to oust him. [Redacted]

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Mismanagement of a conflict with Israel or of Syria's role in Lebanon also could trigger a coup against Assad. The Alawi-dominated military would be especially quick to move, in our view, if setbacks in either area sparked domestic unrest that jeopardized the Alawi's dominant status. [Redacted]

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Tensions between Alawis and Sunnis have been muted in recent years, but the potential for serious communal violence remains. A Sunni rebellion in the late 1970s and early 1980s ended when Assad crushed the Muslim Brotherhood that spearheaded it. Although we judge that fear of reprisals and organizational problems make a second Sunni challenge unlikely, an excessive government reaction to minor outbreaks of Sunni dissidence might trigger large-scale unrest. In most instances the regime would have the resources to crush a Sunni opposition movement, but we believe widespread violence among the populace could stimulate large numbers of Sunni officers and conscripts to desert or mutiny, setting the stage for civil war. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Under most circumstances Moscow's position in Syria should remain strong, but should Syria suffer another devastating military defeat at the hands of Israel new leaders might decide to look elsewhere for military equipment. A shift to a Western arms supplier also could prompt parallel efforts to seek Western financial advice and support. [Redacted]

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Apart from the impact of a major defeat by Israel, Moscow's status in Syria would depend on the makeup of a new regime. The continuation of Alawi dominance would be most beneficial to Soviet interests. The value of an Alawi regime to Moscow would diminish, however, if the new government fell victim to political infighting, forcing the Soviets to choose sides in a series of power struggles. If the Sunnis gained power, Moscow's position would be weaker because of Sunni resentment of Soviet support for the Alawis. [Redacted]

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From Washington's perspective, we believe the worst outcome would be a series of military coups brought on by a succession struggle or major military setback. Assad's practice of dividing power among his subordinates could make it difficult for a single leader to consolidate power. Prolonged intraelite conflict would return Syria to a pattern of chronic instability prevalent before Assad and render Syria an even more dangerously erratic force in the region. Leadership changes would thwart efforts to forge diplomatic agreements with Syria, and a weak government in

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Damascus might heighten Syria's attractiveness as a base for terrorism. [redacted]

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US standing with Syria probably would remain essentially unchanged with the emergence of a new Alawi military regime resolved to maintain the course set by Assad. We expect such a regime would continue Syria's involvement in Lebanon, along with its confrontation with Israel, its support for terrorism, and its close ties to the USSR. [redacted]

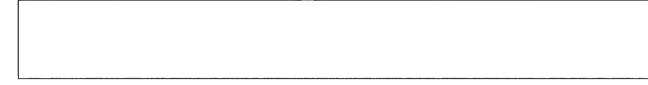
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We judge that US interests in Syria probably would be best served by a Sunni regime as it might well include relative moderates interested in securing Western aid and investment. Such a regime probably would be less inclined to escalate tensions with Israel. [redacted]

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#### THE PRESENT SCENE

According to the US Embassy, President Assad's position is strong, with Syria enjoying unprecedented stability and a high degree of grudging respect in the Arab world. Mindful of the coups that were commonplace before he came to power in 1970, Assad has controlled the military through a network of security organizations and specialized military units commanded by hand-picked loyalists. Concessions to key groups--particularly the Sunni business elite--and large doses of repressive force have minimized civil dissidence. Assad's confrontation with Israel and his maneuvering in Lebanon have added to his stature among the



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[redacted]

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Syrian populace by making Syria a key player in Middle East politics. [redacted]

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Syria's stability, however, rests on the skill of Assad whose health has been failing. Assad experienced a major heart attack in 1983 [redacted]

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[redacted] He has not designated a successor, and the succession mechanism specified in the Syrian constitution has not been tested. [redacted]

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[redacted] serious factionalism centering around Assad's brother, Rif'at, plagues Syria's ruling elite. Since November of 1985, Rif'at has been in self-imposed exile in Paris [redacted]

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According to US Embassy and [redacted]

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[redacted] We believe Rif'at's actions were prompted by concern that his opponents were attempting to undercut his power. [redacted]

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Assad intervened to avert open fighting and forged a compromise between competing factions by creating three vice presidential positions. After stripping Rif'at of command over his military units--the Defense Companies--Assad compensated Rif'at by making him Vice President for Security Affairs. Foreign Minister Khaddam--Rif'at's bitter enemy--became Vice President for Foreign Affairs, and Ba'th Party leader Zuhayr Mashariqa assumed the post of Vice President for Education and Cultural Affairs.

However, [redacted] neither Rif'at nor his rivals are satisfied with the arrangement, leaving Assad's regime vulnerable to further infighting. [redacted]

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Several Western scholars have observed that factionalism within the ruling elite is paralleled by sectarian tensions within society. The Alawis who now dominate the Syrian government under Assad--himself an Alawi--once were a rural underclass subservient to the Sunni majority. According to the US Embassy, Assad's development programs have benefited rural areas at the expense of cities--where Sunnis are concentrated--and the nationalization and formation of large industries have reduced the fortunes of Sunni tradesmen and business groups. Socialist economic reforms and an Islamic revival led to armed uprisings by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunnis in the mid-1970s. Assad finally crushed the rebellion in 1982, but only after attacks on Sunni urban strongholds left thousands dead. [redacted]

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The economy is Syria's most pressing internal problem, and

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[redacted]

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hopes for near-term improvement are dim [redacted]

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[redacted] Real GDP has declined over the last three years, foreign exchange reserves are depleted--making it difficult to purchase imports used for basic consumer goods--and the defense effort consumes over half of the government's current expenditures. The US Embassy reports that the vast majority of Syrians are finding it increasingly difficult to afford basic necessities. Assad has relied heavily on foreign assistance to keep the economy afloat, but aid from moderate Arab states is declining--from \$1.8 billion in 1981 to only \$800 million in 1985--and tensions with Iran threaten to reduce assistance from Tehran. [redacted]

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Efforts to reform the economy by expanding the private sector--launched by newly-appointed Minister of Economy, Muhammad Imadi--may prove effective, but the US Embassy notes that Imadi is encountering resistance from hardline socialists in the Ba'th Party establishment led by Prime Minister Kasm. According to the US Embassy, the recent discovery of two new oilfields probably will improve matters somewhat, but not for the next two years. In the interim, we believe the anticipation of new oil revenue may weaken Assad's resolve to reform an economy plagued by inefficient socialist policies and incompetent managers. [redacted]

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Syria's involvement in Lebanon and its confrontation with Israel also could prompt challenges to Assad's rule, in our view.

[redacted]

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[Redacted]

Assad has limited Syria's direct role in Lebanon by working mainly through surrogate militia factions, but we believe he is determined to achieve Syrian hegemony in order to check Israel's influence and prevent Lebanon from becoming a base for subversion against Syria. Assad could expand Syria's role in Lebanon to levels unacceptable to the military and general populace, or, conversely, the military could become frustrated with his reluctance to take stronger action. Assad has generally avoided moves that could provoke war with Israel, but we believe his drive to achieve strategic parity with Israel could foster an armed clash that would undermine Assad's internal position should he mismanage it or suffer a serious defeat. [Redacted]

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Syria is the centerpiece of Moscow's influence in the Middle East. Moscow thus has a vested interest in major policy shifts or changes in Syrian leadership. The Soviet Union and its East European allies provide virtually all of Syria's arms, and the Soviets deliver more weapons to Syria than to any other Third World client. In spite of his dependence on Soviet military aid, Assad has remained wary of excessive Soviet influence, and, in the view of Western observers, has demonstrated his independence by taking actions contrary to Soviet wishes such as the invasion of Lebanon in 1976. The Soviets have tolerated Assad's independence, but we believe actions by Assad or--more likely--a successor that seriously jeopardized Moscow's stake in Syria could prompt Moscow

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[redacted]

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to intervene by backing factions likely to protect Soviet  
interests. [redacted]

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#### MAJOR PLAYERS

##### Assad's Inner Circle

[redacted] power in Syria largely resides  
with an inner circle of five advisors:

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[redacted]  
respectively. Both are Alawis responsible for keeping watch  
on the military and the population in general.

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o [redacted]  
[redacted] with special responsibilities  
for checking internal challenges to the regime.

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o [redacted]  
[redacted] the principal anticoup force billeted next to the  
presidential palace. [redacted]

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Each advisor is personally close to Assad, as well as part of

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[redacted]  
has used to stay in power. Thus each is in a strong position to  
succeed Assad. To varying degrees, all are opponents of Rif'at  
Assad. [redacted]

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[Redacted]

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Rif'at Assad

Rif'at's power is at a low ebb, but we believe he will remain a key player and potential successor to Assad. Rif'at lost his traditional powerbase--the Defense Companies--in the power struggle of 1984.

[Redacted]

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Rif'at's blatant opportunism and his reputation for corruption and brutality further harm his prospects.

[Redacted]

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Nevertheless, despite ample cause and clear opportunities to do so, Assad has not forced Rif'at out. This suggests that Rif'at's ultimate source of power--his relationship to Assad--is still intact. In 1985, according to the US Embassy, Assad quashed an attempt by Rif'at's enemies to remove him from the governing body of the Ba'th Party

[Redacted]

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In the Embassy's view, Assad may see Rif'at as an integral part of a system that has kept the President in power longer than any previous Syrian ruler.

[Redacted]

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Other Notable Figures

Other individuals less powerful than Assad's inner circle but in positions that might enable them to play a role in a future power struggle include:

[Redacted]

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--Mustafa Talas. Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister;

[Redacted] as a potential successor to

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Assad but, because he is a Sunni, only in a figurehead role.

--Hikmat Shihabi. Army Chief of Staff; a Sunni also considered a candidate for a figurehead presidency.

--Abd al-Halim Khaddam. Vice President for Foreign Affairs;

another Sunni and possible figurehead president, [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Khaddam came to power with Assad in

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1970 and is his principal foreign policy advisor.

--Abd al-Rauf al-Kasm. Prime Minister; a Sunni who heads the

bureaucracy, he has been much criticized [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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--Muhammad al-Imadi. Newly-appointed Minister of Economy and

Foreign Trade; a Western-educated technocrat and a Sunni

whose influence could grow if his program of private sector

expansion improves Syria's economy. [Redacted]

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### The Military

[Redacted] Assad maintains tight control

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over the 400,000 man Syrian military by involving himself in military affairs, using the intelligence services to keep tabs on it, and appointing politically reliable Alawis to senior officer positions. Thus far there has been no evidence of significant

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[redacted]

antiregime activity among the military. Sectarian cleavages, however, at least potentially jeopardize cohesiveness. Sunnis make up 60 percent of the Syrian officer corps but are concentrated in junior officer ranks; enlisted men are predominantly Sunni conscripts. We believe that a renewal of communal violence between Alawis and Sunnis could inspire Sunnis in the military to turn against the regime. [redacted]

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### The Ba'th Party

The party is headed by Assad and dominated by Alawi military officers. After the armed forces, the party is the key institution in governing Syria, with a nationwide network of organizations for implementing the regime's socialist program. The Ba'th party thus sets Syria apart from other countries in the region, particularly Iran, where religious institutions and doctrines shape political life. Although party functionaries have been loyal to the regime thus far, we believe they would resist changes by Assad or a successor that threatened to undermine the party's position in Syria. [redacted]

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### Alawis

The Alawis make up about 12 percent of the population and are the key support group for the regime. Assad has maintained their allegiance by concentrating Alawis in the higher echelons of the military and government and by adopting policies that favor rural

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[redacted]

areas. Although literacy among Alawis is low--10 to 15 percent--an educated Alawi elite has emerged and provides the Alawi community with critical links to the government power structure. Alawis are divided into four confederations, each consisting of 7 to 10 tribes and each with its own tribal and religious leader. Rivalries among clans and tribes exist; should a power struggle develop in the military or the government among Alawi elites, we believe factions based on clan or tribal loyalties could form. [redacted]

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### Sunnis

The once-dominant Sunnis make up over 60 percent of the population and are most prominent in the urban areas. Alawis seized control of the government from the Sunnis in the 1960s and nationalized major industries, leaving the Sunnis with a small corner of an economy they once dominated. Sunnis are likely to bear the brunt of recent economic reverses that affect the cities more than the rural areas. Sunni opposition to Alawi rule peaked in the mid-1970s with a fundamentalist revival and the onset of violent opposition to the regime by the Muslim Brotherhood. Resistance lasted until 1982 when Assad's troops killed thousands of Sunnis in the city of Hamah. [redacted]

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Although the Muslim Brotherhood's suppression drastically reduced armed dissidence, we judge a significant potential still exists for another Sunni opposition movement. In part the

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Brotherhood's role was to exploit and orchestrate opposition activity by other organized groups including professional associations which participated in general strikes, students who demonstrated, professors who staged mass resignations, and bazaar merchants who shut down their businesses. These groups still exist, and under proper leadership they could coalesce into a large movement.

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Should a new Sunni challenge to the regime develop, certain sectors of the Sunni populace are especially likely to play a large role. They include urban traders and artisans who are disadvantaged by competition from state-run businesses and who were the prime constituency for the Muslim Brotherhood; Sunni students, intellectuals, and young professionals who formed the base of support for the militant faction of the Muslim Brotherhood; and remnants of the Brotherhood itself who could become leaders in a new Sunni opposition movement.

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#### SCENARIOS OF DRAMATIC POLITICAL CHANGE

In building the following scenarios we do not intend to imply that instability in Syria is imminent or inevitable. Assad is a tough pragmatist well-equipped to cope with challenges to his rule. Serious problems loom, however, and the capacity of Syria's leaders to manage these problems cannot be taken for granted. These scenarios are presented in the order of likelihood from most to least likely. Following each scenario is a list of indicators--a series of observable events--that signal milestones in the scenario's progression.

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[Redacted]  
SUCCESSION POWER STRUGGLE

Despite his unpopularity, Rif'at, as Assad's brother, is well-positioned to seize power upon the President's death or incapacitation. His prospects for success would hinge on how quickly he can rebuild his powerbase before Assad departs the scene. We expect, however, that Rif'at's tenure would be short-lived, largely because he has amassed a formidable array of enemies. Even if his opponents were inclined to permit Rif'at to govern, Rif'at's likely efforts to remove his opponents in an effort to consolidate his power would force their hand. Before long, we believe senior military leaders such as Ali Duba would try to oust Rif'at. [Redacted]

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Rif'at is so unpopular that even the prospect of his succeeding to the presidency might trigger a coup while Assad is still in office. Although not likely, we believe Assad's designation of Rif'at as his successor or some other action by Assad pointing unequivocally to Rif'at's succession almost certainly would prompt countermeasures by Rif'at's enemies. Initially, they would try to persuade Assad to change his mind or maneuver to reduce President Assad's powers. Should these measures fail, however, we believe Rif'at's opponents would seriously consider moving against both Assad and Rif'at. [Redacted]

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Assad's practice of dividing power among a circle of close lieutenants would make it difficult for a single leader to assume

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control quickly, in our view. More likely, we believe a junta composed predominantly of Alawi officers would take power. To enhance its legitimacy and broaden its base of support, the junta might install a prominent Sunni civilian as a figurehead president. [redacted]

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We judge that the lack of a dominant leader could easily undermine this arrangement. Factional infighting over the division of power probably would develop quickly, with clan and tribal cleavages reenforcing the splits. Moreover, disagreements would arise over how to address the multitude of problems currently facing Syria: confrontation with Israel, a badly faltering economy, Syria's role in the Middle East peace process, its involvement in Lebanon, and Syrian-PLO relations. [redacted]

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Under these conditions, Syria could lapse into a cycle of military coups, with no leader able to maintain power for long. Divisions among Alawis, in turn, would encourage Sunnis to try to reassert their dominance, thus setting the stage for serious sectarian strife or even civil war if effective Sunni opposition groups were to develop. [redacted]

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#### Indicators of the Developing Scenario

- o Hafiz demotes or retires enemies of Rif'at.
- o Assad cuts back further on his work schedule; trips abroad for medical treatment become more frequent.
- o Assad designates Rif'at as his successor or upgrades his control over key sectors of the government such as the armed forces.

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- o Rif'at begins to stand in for Assad at official functions or takes over day-to-day management of the government.
- o Military units commanded by Rif'at's enemies redeploy nearer to Damascus and other key installations.
- o Alawi clan leaders publicly align with leaders of different factions within the junta.
- o Key members of an Alawi-dominated junta resign. [redacted]

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#### MILITARY REVERSES SPARK A COUP

Despite Assad's record of careful brinksmanship, we believe Syria's ongoing confrontation with Israel or its involvement in Lebanon could spawn military reverses serious enough to undermine Assad's regime. Armed conflict with Israel could develop in a number of ways. Syria's continuing military buildup--begun in 1978 to achieve strategic parity with Israel--could trigger an Israeli preemptive attack, particularly if Arab-Israeli tensions were mounting. Assad's recent missile deployments in Lebanon and Syria could prompt an Israeli strike, possibly stemming from the downing of an Israeli aircraft. Finally, war with Israel would ensue should Syria attempt to retake the Golan Heights--a longtime objective that Assad recently reaffirmed. [redacted]

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In our view, Assad's determination to achieve hegemony over Lebanon--long a goal of Syrian rulers--might cause the President to enlarge Syria's role by ordering regular Syrian military units to do most of the fighting instead of relying on surrogate militia factions. Mounting casualties would spark unrest among Sunni

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[redacted]

junior officers and conscripts in Lebanon should they perceive Assad's growing involvement in Lebanon as an Alawi misadventure. Alternately, the Syrian military might become seriously disgruntled if Assad persisted in depending mostly on militia factions in the face of both mounting casualties among Syrian troops supporting the militia and a lack of progress in asserting Syrian control. [redacted]

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We believe the military would be eager to move against Assad if military reverses threatened Alawi rule by provoking serious domestic unrest. A humiliating setback on the Golan Heights would have the greatest potential for triggering antiregime protests. Should unrest develop, Sunni business leaders--already hurt by Assad's economic policies, according to the US Embassy--might use the issue of military mishaps to build support for a challenge to Assad and other Alawis. We judge that Assad would put down antiregime activity, but if he acted ineptly or used excessive force, this would encourage further unrest. Military leaders would be especially alarmed if Rif'at or another person with a similar reputation for brutality was given responsibility for restoring order. In our view, Assad's failing health would give added impetus to coup plotting, particularly if senior Alawi officers who are close to Assad decided that his condition had led to an ill-advised military decision or was hampering the President's ability to blunt domestic challenges from the Sunnis.

[redacted]

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Should outbreaks of antiregime activity continue or grow while Assad showed no signs of reversing course--or perhaps tried to recoup losses by ordering even harsher measures--we believe the military would try to replace him before an antiregime movement could gather momentum. They probably would establish a junta and move to quiet unrest, combining carefully measured force with concessions to key groups. Prospects for continued instability would depend on how effectively this program was implemented and how far along efforts to build an antiregime movement had progressed.

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Indicators of the Developing Scenario

- o Political pressure in Israel builds for a stronger response to Syria's arms buildup and missile redeployments.
- o Syria suffers a military setback at the hands of the Israelis.
- o Syrian casualties in Lebanon mount sharply.
- o Antiregime activities, including demonstrations and strikes, continue despite brutal suppression of earlier protests.
- o Assad vows to crush dissidents and hints at a new Syrian military initiative against the Israelis or warring parties in Lebanon.
- o Assad fires key military officers for criticizing his policies.

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**COMMUNAL VIOLENCE ESCALATES INTO CIVIL WAR**

Sunni dissidence has been minimal since Assad crushed the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s, but deep-seated tensions

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remain--keeping alive the potential for minor incidents to grow into major flareups of communal violence. For example, disgruntlement over price hikes, altercations between Sunni citizens and security forces, or anger at privileges accorded to Alawis at the expense of Sunnis could foster small-scale protests. Excessive government force in quelling such disturbances might be seen by Sunnis as evidence of a government vendetta against all Sunnis, precipitating even larger protests by other Sunni groups.

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Sunni merchants and artisans probably would launch protests similar to those staged in previous years, for example by closing down businesses and the bazaars in Hamah or Aleppo and possibly Damascus. Sunni students would stage campus demonstrations, and Sunni professional associations would organize work stoppages. Mistaking the new protests as a resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood, the government would step up its use of force and launch violent attacks on a broad spectrum of Sunni community leaders as well as on those engaged in protests. Regime efforts to restore order would founder if government violence against protestors inspired broad-based communal violence between Alawis and Sunnis. [redacted]

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A general campaign of Alawi violence against Sunnis might push even moderate Sunnis to join the opposition. Remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood--some returning from exile in Iraq--could

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provide a core of leadership for the movement. Although the regime has the resources to crush such a venture, we believe brutal attacks on Sunni civilians might prompt large numbers of Sunni officers and conscripts to desert or to stage mutinies in support of dissidents, and Iraq might supply them with sufficient weapons to launch a civil war. [redacted]

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#### Indicators of the Developing Scenario

- o Strikes and demonstrations demanding government action to end discrimination against Sunnis become frequent.
- o Security personnel force businesses to reopen and confiscate the inventories of many.
- o The government conducts indiscriminate roundups of Sunni leaders.
- o Syrian leaders accuse Iraq and the Muslim Brotherhood of fomenting unrest.
- o Violent incidents including bombings of Sunni social gatherings take place; Sunnis retaliate with similar violence against Alawis.
- o Government attacks on suspected Sunnis dissidents increase; sometimes razing whole blocks in Sunni residential areas.
- o Sunni troops refuse to fire on demonstrators; some units mutiny and join growing Sunni opposition movement. [redacted]

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#### THE SOVIET ANGLE

Although Syria's alliance with the Soviet Union is long-standing, the accession of new leaders could set the stage for a weakening of bilateral ties. A humiliating military defeat by Israel would be the most likely trigger for a new policy because it would further call into question the value of Soviet

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[redacted]

military equipment and training--the basis for Syria's relationship with Moscow.

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[redacted]

Although Syria turned again to the Soviet Union to replace its equipment losses, another serious defeat by Israel might convince new leaders that Syria should seek arms from other sources such as France. A shift to a Western arms supplier could, in turn, spur economic reformers like Minister of Economy Imadi to look to the West for financial aid in implementing his program of private sector expansion. Imadi encouraged Western governments and firms to invest in Syria during the 1970s. An aggressive attempt by Moscow to check these developments by backing the opponents of such moves--most likely Syrian officers bent on maintaining close ties to Moscow or hardline Ba'thist socialists--would offend Syrian nationalism and deepen antiSoviet feelings.

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Apart from the effects of a major defeat by Israel, Syria's willingness to move away from the Soviet Union would hinge on the composition of a new Syrian leadership group. We believe Moscow's interests would be seriously jeopardized if Sunnis came to power through a civil war. Many Sunnis resent the Soviets because they are closely identified with Alawi dominance, and Sunnis would be especially hostile toward the Soviets if they had supported Alawis with military equipment and advisors in a civil war. Moreover,

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the vested interests that some Sunni businessmen have in economic reform would make them more willing than Alawi military leaders to establish economic links with the West. [redacted]

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Moscow's interests would be best protected if an Alawi military regime determined to perpetuate the status quo under Assad came to power. Such a government would be most inclined to maintain close ties with Moscow and hostile relations with Washington. At the same time, it would avoid reckless military moves that could trigger a dangerous encounter with Tel Aviv or Washington. The usefulness to the Soviets of an Alawi regime would diminish, however, if infighting developed among Alawis. Coups might again become common, confronting the Soviets with the possibility of losing ground in Syria should they fail to back the winning side. [redacted]

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#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Among the various scenarios of dramatic change, we believe the worst outcome for Washington would be chronic instability--occasioned by a series of military coups--that denied Syria coherent leadership and rendered it an even more volatile force in the region. The United States and other parties to the Middle East peace process would find effective diplomacy with Syria increasingly difficult, and a weak central government in Damascus might add to Syria's attractiveness as a haven for terrorists. [redacted]

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A less threatening, but still ominous, outcome for the United States would be the rise of a strong Alawi regime dominated by the military. An Alawi junta would continue Assad's maneuvering in Lebanon, his confrontation with Israel, and his support for terrorism. Moreover, Moscow would maintain its foothold in Syria. Washington would be likely to gain only if the new leaders, lacking Assad's skill at careful brinksmanship, engaged Syria in a losing war with Israel that led to a political realignment and a pro-Western shift in Syria's policies. [redacted]

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In our view, US interests would be best served by a Sunni regime controlled by business-oriented moderates. Business moderates would see a strong need for Western aid and investment to build Syria's private economy, thus opening the way for stronger ties to Western governments. Although we believe such a government would give some support--or at least pay strong lip-service--to Arab causes, this group's preoccupation with economic development and its desire to limit the role of the military would give Sunnis an incentive to avoid a war with Israel. We believe Washington's gains would be mitigated, however, if Sunni fundamentalists assumed power. Although Syria's secular traditions would make it extremely difficult for religious zealots to establish an Islamic Republic, should they succeed they would likely deepen hostilities with Israel and provide support and sanctuary to terrorist groups. [redacted]

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